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# Perversions of the American Dream in the 20th Century Novel: Requiem for a Dream and The Great Gatsby

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Perversions of the American Dream in the 20<sup>th</sup>  
Century Novel: *Requiem for a Dream* and *The Great  
Gatsby*

By: Mary Menzemer

## Introduction

The American Dream's outlines are pretty clear: find a good job, make enough money, raise a good family, love your neighbors and friends, and uphold American laws. In this essay, I am going to explore what happens when the dream's goals are darkened, corrupted, and attempted to be found by unconventional means and shortcut through the lens of two novels written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at the height of the American Dream's popularity: *Requiem for a Dream* and *The Great Gatsby*. *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925, at a time when a slew of immigrants were seeking better lives for themselves in America while *Requiem for a Dream* was published in 1978, at a time when the middle class was solidifying their own identity and first and second generation immigrants were trying to assimilate themselves into it. First, I will conduct a literary analysis of both novels to show how they are thematically connected to this illusory American Dream, and then I will give historical context for each novel to show how Jewish and black populations, both critiqued in each novel, were looked down upon in a society which was supposed to welcome them and make their dreams come true.

## Introduction to Literary Analysis

The American Dream is a concept that has been written about in various works of fiction throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With America's rise as a worldwide super power, visions of grandeur and the "anything is possible" notion danced not only in the minds of incoming immigrants' but in the notions of the American establishment. The naiveté and hopelessness of this dream is evident in two major American literary works written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: *The Great Gatsby* and *Requiem for a Dream*. F. Scott Fitzgerald and Hubert Selby Jr. are two American authors with the same vision of the destructive power and futility of the Great Dream. Written

nearly half a century apart, each novel discusses class and race struggle, goals, and the potential for achieving dreams, but the characters in the novels eventually discover their dreams do not materialize as they had expected, or desired. The reason for this is because the characters try to find a shortcut to achieve wealth, status, power, and discovery to what niche they belong. For the characters in *Requiem for a Dream*, the characters' niche is within the dark, urban underground society of Brooklyn and for those in *The Great Gatsby*, it is within the lifestyle of the rich and successful. Harry, Marion, Tyrone, and Sara try to escape the conventions they are born into by means of illegal substances, and their addictions corrupt their attempts and lead to delusion and ultimate entrapment, while Gatsby shortcuts his way to prominence and enigmatic attractiveness by illegal means and Nick endeavors to see moral goodness beyond the corruption of money in the society in which he surrounds himself. These characters' misperceptions of their societies and how they can lead better lives through the idea of an American Dream leads to their dark, perverse realities.

### **Analysis of *Requiem for a Dream*: How Dreams Lead to Disillusionment**

*Requiem for a Dream* can be summarized in one very poignant quote from Selby's text: "Their disease made it possible for them to believe whatever lies it was necessary for them to believe to continue to pursue and indulge their disease, even to the point of them believing they were not enslaved by it, but actually free" (191). Selby states this for each of his main characters, the Jewish and the non-Jewish. The state of addiction, this 'disease', is the most prevalent theme seen throughout the novel. Addiction is what inherently prevents the four main characters, Harry, Tyrone, Marion, and Sara from achieving what they so desperately want to achieve, which is to become rich. It causes them to do things they would not normally do, all in pursuit of an elusive American Dream, unique to each character. Selby proves that not only

addiction, but also delusion, can perhaps be one of the worst diseases as he follows the lives these four characters who are heading down the same road to ethical destruction.

Harry, Tyrone, and Marion, enslaved to their heroin addiction, hope to one day score a pound of pure heroin and get exceedingly rich by selling it. Sara, Harry's mother, is enslaved to her loneliness, her television set which keeps her company, and her 'diet pills' which are actually amphetamines. She hopes to someday be featured on television and be loved by all America. But Selby does not write this book to show the reader how destructive drugs can be. He seeks to show how destructive any addiction can be--addiction to dreams, drugs, television, Mahler's Resurrection Symphony, memories, and even, in Sara Goldfarb's case, the manic desire to fit into a red dress. Selby uses addiction symbolically

Harry and Tyrone work very well together, first at selling Harry's mother's television set on a regular basis to obtain money to buy heroin, then at actually selling heroin. Their "operation was in black and white" (117) meaning that Tyrone was able to sell to blacks, and Harry was able to sell to the whites. Rather than having different strategies to sell to the different races, they use their own race as an instrument to achieve their sales. Brooklyn is still very racially divided at this time; when Harry tries to sit in front of a bus, Tyrone gets angry at him because he thinks he will get them in major trouble. Harry would be guilty by association. While Harry and Tyrone fit in socially with others of different races, this is not the case in business transactions. Harry's attempt to sit in the front of the bus echoes the Rosa Parks controversy which happened more than twenty years before the book takes place, further emphasizing the novel's color divide. What happens to equal rights for every man, a belief that drew many an immigrant to America and resonated in the minds and hearts of black

communities who were improperly treated? It is virtually non-existent, especially in this large urban area where street smarts could be the difference between life and death.

Harry and Tyrone, though the best of friends, insinuate that even the tightest bonds are susceptible to stress and break under the influence of the fear of not being able to satisfy one's addiction. Selby writes, "Harry and Tyrone were holding out a little more on each other each day. If one guy somehow got caught short and his nose and eyes were running and his body shivering...and asked the other one to give him a taste, the guy swore up and down he had nothing" (251). Even with their friendship becoming more compromised every day, Harry and Tyrone continue to refuse to acknowledge the fact that they are addicts. Instead, they convince themselves that the market is simply just down for right now, and that their lives will return to easiness in the near future.

Selby places many warning signs that the characters ignore, leading up to each individual's major crisis, or the climax of the book. The crises are caused by their various illusions of how their dreams, goals, and plans will result. For Harry and Tyrone, they would constantly say how once they got into the business of selling heroin, "...we wouldn't fuck it up like those other assholes. We won't get strung out and blow it" (9). Their dream is to sell enough so they can make enough money to buy a pound of uncut heroin, sell it, and live comfortably for the rest of their lives. This participates in the American ideal that one can accomplish anything to one's heart's content. Then again, it is Harry's worst nightmare to be like the "lames and squares [who] all make it home from the 9 to 5 and sit down to a dinner with the wife and kids, the wife looking like the same beat up broad" (15). He has other, unconventional, plans in mind. The dream progresses further with Harry and Marion's dream to one day open a coffee shop and playhouse. The problem is that neither of them takes into account the amount

of time, money, and effort it will take, not to mention the illegal method of pursuing it. Marion tells Harry, “it’s so exciting and it could work, I just know it could” (69) and together “they felt whole. They felt united...believing in each other’s light, each other’s dream” (70). A belief on its own is not enough to fulfill a person permanently, and as Harry and Marion become more and more addicted to the high of heroin, they forget their love for each other, and lose their dreams in constant pursuit of their habit.

The first time Tyrone gets put into jail, he meets an old man in his cell who tells stories of his wild, drug-addicted past. The old man “sat like a guru in the corner, dispensing his stories of glory and enlightened wisdom” (173). He talks about the days when he was selling and using as the golden ages, when heroin was cheap and plentiful. He says he is the only one left of all the people he once went around with, and reveals his secrets to the other junkies. Tyrone finds himself attentive, yet disgusted. Tyrone “gradually became aware of a sense of identification, like they had something in common...but [he] ain’t gonna marry no habit” (176). The old man becomes a motif in *Requiem for a Dream*, and represents the destructive path that Harry and Tyrone are headed towards if they do not cease chasing their unrealistic delusions; he is an example of Selby’s observable foreshadowing. Harry and Tyrone routinely think about him in the book, and even though Harry only saw him for a brief second, he makes a huge impact on him. When Harry bails Tyrone out, Tyrone convinces himself that he “need a little tase baby...git the tase a that jail out a mah pretty little mouth” (178). The irony here is so clear—to forget about the old man, he shoots up, furthering himself into the very trap that the old man was once in. Even though they thought about this mysterious old man now and again, “they would do something about it before that would happen to them” (193). They do not actually do

anything about it, and instead are forced to wait until Harry becomes an amputee, Tyrone a jailbird, and Marion a prostitute.

Marion's family is very rich, and she has all the money she could ever want at her disposal. Having financial security of any kind is one of the typical facets of the American Dream, yet this annoys her rather than satisfying her. She says of her parents, "They bug me with their middle class pretensions, you know what I mean?" (49). The American middle class of the late 1970s and early 1980s had ideals similar to those of the middle class living in 1950s America, or even Victorian Britain. The outer image was one of the most important ways to become and stay socially acceptable during this time, whether one fit in with the rich, poor, bohemians, or other social groups. Dressing agreeably, staying polite, and acting like one had more wealth and status than one really did were ways to maintain this image. Things like sex, bad language, substance usage were widely repressed and taboo. Even though the Victorians and 1950s America refuse to acknowledge these taboos, their repressed, banal, routine way of life was what many wanted. Marion rebels against these ideas, and instead acts like she has less than what she really has in order to fit in with the dope fiends. The addicts ask her for money to buy heroin, which is not a problem for her since she knows she will satisfy her cravings as well.

Another way the characters rebel against Victorian and typical conservative class values is when they are completely out of heroin and money, and go to Big Tim, a physically large, wealthy black man who sells heroin only to women who have sex with him. Going to Big Tim is a last resort, because he will only give heroin for prostitution instead of money. While Harry is analyzing the situation and starts to feel jealous of Big Tim and complete disgust at the idea of his girlfriend having sex for drugs, he thinks, "She's free. Just like the rest of us. Free to do anything she fuckin wants man. What's this fuckin Victorian horseshit?" (239) The image of



America that society wants Harry to have is burning in his mind, though he refuses to admit it. Harry has spent the majority of the novel thus far disregarding the typical values of American society by being a drug dealer for a living and having relationships with Tyrone and Marion, who come from different socioeconomic backgrounds. When it comes to Marion, Harry cannot forget traditional American values of having a singular, monogamous relationship, and Harry has a difficult time trying to maintain this while rejecting the other Victorian ideals that make the rest of society function and survive. Harry interprets ‘Victorian’ here to mean not just sexual prudery, but unadulterated monogamy. It is only by ignoring the warning signs of imminent destruction, such as the example with Big Tim, that Harry, Tyrone, and Marion completely lose themselves and their instincts of right and wrong.

Marion has some very strong ideas about America’s culture and the system by which it is governed. Her inner monologue reminisces about being in Italy and being inspired by wondering what it would be like “to sit [in the cafe] a few hundred years ago in that light and color and listen to Vivaldi’s strings...” (88). She feels so inspired by the summer lights and color that she starts painting, and she decides to “dedicate her life to it” (89). While it makes her happy for a time, she soon falls depressed during the winter when all the lights are dimmed. She “tried to follow the sun to the past, the very recent past, but all she found was herself” (89). Being in America, in Brooklyn, is dull and depressing for Marion. Being surrounded by all the pretty lights and colors gives Marion an escape from life, and this is what she now seeks to experience again through heroin. She talks about Europe in such a positive light while talking about America in a very negative one. She says about America’s legal system, “[The cops are] typical fascist pigs. They’re the same cops that killed the students at Kent State, that torture people in Korea and South Africa...Everybody’s a commie. Talk about freedom and human

rights and you're a commie" (179). Her idea of the ideal system comes with the rights that the American Dream is supposed to have. She blames the justice system for being hypocritical and the fact that the middle class is blind to the nature and intent of cops' actions. The middle class believes that if someone has the label as a police officer, then they must be doing the right thing all the time, and this is what Marion despises.

Another example in this novel of the questionability of human rights is related to Sara Goldfarb and Selby's portrayal of the medical system during the late 1970s in Brooklyn. Sara Goldfarb is a character who draws much pity from the reader. Widowed and alone, she has two main comforts: her daily box of chocolate (among other foods, i.e. cheese Danish, cream cheese bagels, and lox) and the television. All day long she watches it, and actually interacts with the characters as if they were real. While Marion asks of the television, "What sort of cretins watch this garbage and are influenced by it?" (231), Sara keeps "one and a half eyes on the television . . . [to] make the job, the day and life pass bearably on" (42). She is so influenced by the television that she actually wants to be on it, and believes a scam artist when he tells her she can be. Driven mad by this possibility, she decides on one major determination: "It was a case of lose weight or die a lingering and ignoble death" (62). Sara's situation represents the typical Boulevard of Broken Dreams scenario: the desire for riches, the perfect body, and all the admiration which comes with being famous— gets snubbed relentlessly. Far from Hollywood, Sara still longs to be loved, if not by her absent family, her future fans. This dream lands her not amongst palm trees in her bikini body, but wearing paper slippers in a mental hospital taking even more medication in an attempt to cure her diseased mind.

Perhaps the only voice of reason in this novel other than Sara's friends Ada and Rae is Dr. Spencer. Dr. Spencer is intelligent, and does his best to not let the hospital system to which

he is bound to influence him. Sara, with her constant use of amphetamines and lack of food, experiences amphetamine psychosis and is admitted to the psych ward instead of to the basic medical ward. The chief Dr. Harwood tells Dr. Spencer that “I have told you, I don’t care about that woman...the worst that can happen is that she will have a few unnecessary shock treatments” (225). The unnecessary shock treatments end up ruining Sara’s personality for good, driving her to actual insanity. Spencer tries to tell Harwood that all she needs is proper food, water, and rest and in a few weeks she would return to normalcy. Harwood undermines him by believing that all Spencer wants to do is take control over Dr. Reynold’s diagnosis and take over his job. Spencer tells Harwood, “I thought your responsibility was to treat the sick” (225) and Harwood responds, “Don’t be naïve doctor...harmony breeds efficiency” (225-226). Dr. Harwood reflects the fears of the recent past of extreme right of left wing political parties coming into government control; he runs his hospital like a communist or utilitarian party would run a country. He seeks to establish and maintain social order within the hospital by disregarding hard medical facts. He keeps his staff under control in order to have the most good for the most amounts of people. This is also a utilitarian idea, and not at all what America is typically supposed to represent, especially during the late, developed 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is also a fear many other American authors have written about, in attempts to make a point about where they think society is heading. Books like *1984*, *Brave New World*, and *Fahrenheit 451* exemplify the premonitions of a world and government which is apathetic towards its citizens. Selby, without creating alternate universes for his characters is trying to tell the reader, like he is with the addictions of Tyrone and Harry that under the shiny American surface, lies corruption, greed, and apathy. There are many undercurrents to what is the vast ocean of America during this time period such as the fear of communism and the explosion of the Cold War, the effects of the

aftermath of the Vietnam War, the decreasing feelings of peace, love, and happiness of the earlier 70s hippies, and the transition into a society not ridden by harmful effects of war. Harry and Tyrone often ignore the truth of what is happening to them and by portraying this, Selby preludes the possibility of an American Dream actually existing.

While reading *Requiem for a Dream*, the reader may question if Harry, Tyrone, Marion, and Sara lived conventional, average lives, would they have been better off? If they had stuck to the formula, would Harry's arm still be attached to his shoulder? Would Tyrone not be in prison? Would Marion not have resorted to prostituting herself? Would Sara be happier, saner, not subject to unnecessary, craze-inducing shock treatments? Even though there is no official "requiem", or remembrance for their fallen dreams in the book, an imagined requiem could not exist without the dream. Selby chooses to leave his characters alive at the end of the novel and does not lay anyone to eternal rest. Even though the reader too is able to create their future, he ends on a very pessimistic note, without a requiem for any of their dreams.

### **Analysis of *The Great Gatsby*: How Dreams Lead to Corruption**

The four main characters in *The Great Gatsby*, major counterparts to those in *Requiem for a Dream* are Tom, Daisy, Nick, and Jay Gatsby. Though the major difference between these two works is largely a matter of the lives of the rich versus the lives of the middle class, the central theme of them are the same: the destructivity of delusions, without the luxury of a requiem. The concept of "Midwestern Morality" is much more concrete in *The Great Gatsby* than in *Requiem for a Dream* because Nick, Daisy, Tom, Gatsby, and Jordan are all from the Midwest. Their previous ways of living compete much with the way they live presently, in New York City, the epicenter of American civilization. Each book's characters have a different way of looking at the city, which reflects their different social backgrounds. Looking at this along

with Gatsby and Nick's delusions and the susceptibility of even the rich to major corruption, these two texts from vastly different historical contexts provide a well-rounded analysis of the American Dream's disillusion.

It is worth noting that Nick Carraway's first-hand view of Jay Gatsby is deluded, and greatly misinforms the reader. While Jay Gatsby's motives for befriending Nick become clear when he asks him to set up a meeting with Daisy, Nick himself remains under a naïve spell and does not believe that Gatsby is using him. Nick looks at Gatsby as if someone from a lucid dream, someone whom he knew was once James Gatz, the poor soldier. All Nick really sees and knows is the Jay Gatsby who is noble for pursuing his own dream and living in complete luxury. In fact, Jay Gatsby ties himself to the fantasy that a mercurial woman whom he has not seen in five years and is now married will run straight back to him with open arms. Nick believes so much in the wealthy, popular Jay Gatsby that he calls his father Mr. Gatsby at Jay's funeral. The character who Nick believes to be the epitome of financial success is still trying to win his dream, Daisy, and he is actually just as internally tortured as anybody else in the novel, Nick believes that Gatsby has "an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness" (Fitzgerald 6) that is unique, and therefore to be praised. In reality, Gatsby's hope fails him miserably. Nick believes that "foul dust floated in the wake of [Gatsby's] dreams" (2), implying that his failure was not Gatsby's fault he could not move on emotionally from Daisy, and that the failure was from outside forces. The 'foul dust' represents society working against Gatsby by misperceiving his past and present actions, for the sake of avarice and gossip rather than empathy.

Nick also constantly watches Gatsby's house; he knows who goes there to party, when the parties end, his car leaves, and when caterers deliver fruit to his front door. Nick could only know this in such a short time by making a hobby out of it. After getting to know Jay Gatsby

more and more, he starts to notice the way Daisy and him get along with each other. When he makes his observations, he is not lying to the reader; he is simply calling his observations as he notices them, due to his unrelenting policy of honesty of which he tells to Jordan Baker near the end of the novel. He recognizes the fact that “when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams-[it wasn’t] though her own fault but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion” (101).

However, Daisy on her own is a rather vapid, stale character and it is Gatsby that gives her meaning and importance in the novel. Yet, Nick translates this in his mind as Gatsby having hope and holding onto the past, and even when Nick tells him he cannot do that, Nick does not hold it against him as he does the rest of society.

Jay Gatz’s dream of becoming financially stable and acquiring the woman he loves began how any other person’s dream begins; they were “reveries... [that were] a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality” (105). Gatsby never intended, or really wanted to become as rich as he became; he simply wanted to bring Daisy back to him in any way he could because he knows that a lot of money would, in theory, attract her. Much like Harry or Tyrone, doing something illegal like smuggling alcohol did not necessarily come across as an immoral action to him. Gatsby himself even becomes above the law, when he does a favor for the commissioner and can magically escape punishment and instill fear and intimidation in officers of the law. Social differences, like that between Nick and Gatsby and those between upper middle class families like Marion’s and Tyrone’s lower class neighborhood of Brooklyn play a major part in the characters from *Requiem for a Dream* and *The Great Gatsby*’s view of how matters in the government and the business world take place.

An example of these social differences is Nick’s occupation and the society he chooses to surround himself with. Nick works in a sales environment and surrounds himself with various

businessmen and salespeople at Gatsby's parties. They are all selling things that higher class people believed they needed at the time: insurance, cars, or bank bonds. All of the "solid and prosperous Americans" (46) sold something for a living. This represents the economic boom of the 1920s before the Great Depression hit later that decade. Consumerism as a hobby or social event was growing rapidly, and the rich people Nick surrounds himself with could buy whatever they want, whenever they wanted it. Nick notices how Gatsby's "resourcefulness of movement is so peculiarly American-that comes with the absence of lifting work" (68). Even though Gatsby worked pretty hard throughout his youth and when he was a soldier, it does not show presently, because of how acclimated he has gotten to living a lavish life that he was not born into. He notices how Daisy's voice is "full of money" (127) not only because it sounds pleasing to the ear, but because she was born into a leisure class family—the major difference between the two former lovers. While she had always been used to a lavish lifestyle, Gatsby, on the other hand, has almost acclimated to his environment almost too quickly for an outsider; he does not particularly care about being rich, but he knows how to blend in with the rest of the rich townspeople.

Jay Gatsby evades a speeding ticket with a flash of a Christmas card the commissioner sent him, and the cop immediately apologizes and hurries on his way. In this case, simple bribery suspended the law, something which every citizen is held to. Nick is amazed and amused rather than disgusted. The characters in *Requiem for a Dream* would be disgusted at this act, because this example is similar to what they are talking about when they refer to dirty cops and the corruption of the American government. When Gatsby was a young, poor soldier, he experienced something similar to what the characters in *Requiem* experienced: "he was liable at the whim of an impersonal government to be blown anywhere about the world" (156). To say it

simply: the American government in both literary worlds is detached and unconcerned when one of their citizens does not have money.

Nick makes another point about not having money in an America where keeping up appearances is important. While Marion and Harry especially object to keeping up their appearance in what they believe to be a society fueled by face masks and botched middle class values, Nick recognizes that “Americans, while occasionally willing to be serfs, have always been obstinate about being peasantry” (93). He means that serfs, like immigrants coming to America or someone coming from a poor background, are able to work their way up into a higher class. The end of feudalism meant that a person was free to become or do anything he wished. The downside is that they are slaves, literally and metaphorically, to this class mobility idea that may never come to fruition. Peasants, on the other hand, are stuck in the low class with no possibility of movement. They are poor and look poor. Nick is saying that Americans are willing to work hard, at first, for low pay, but they will never want to look or seem like to others that they do not have money. Another example of this is when Myrtle, Tom, Nick, and Catherine are in a hotel room and Myrtle wears a dress Tom has bought for her. When complimented on the dress, she responds ever so nonchalantly, ““I just slip this on when I don’t care what I look like”” (35). Even though she is not a member of Tom’s society, she knows what to say and how to act to keep up appearances like the rest of them, and she does not want to look poor.

One of the most noticeable differences between *Requiem for a Dream* and *The Great Gatsby* is looking at how each novel views New York City. Brooklyn in *Requiem* is a tough place to live; Harry and Tyrone brave the dangerous streets on a daily basis with a great possibility of physical harm, and feel incredibly out of place when Harry goes to Macy’s in



Manhattan to buy his mother a television. However, in *The Great Gatsby*, the area just outside the city is called “the valley of ashes” and a “dismal scene” (28). Inside the city, however, is a completely different scene. Tom and Nick go there to party in the Plaza Hotel, and Nick likes “the racy, adventurous feel... [and walking] up Fifth Avenue, picking out romantic women from the crowd. . .” (61). Nick idealizes New York as a place of endless possibilities and where women are interested in him. Jay Gatsby’s parties to him seem “significant, elegant and profound” (51), a far cry from *Requiem for a Dream*’s drug-induced gatherings in the basements of churches or some small, dirty apartment. What Fitzgerald shows the reader as the novel progresses is that the life of the rich and prominent can also be barren, lonely, and full of suffering. These financially secure individuals are not lacking not in money or drugs, but in psychological needs, such as true love, friendship, and an unjudging environment.

Nick needs to be reassured that good resides in people, underneath the rotten layers. He needs to believe in the ethically pure element of the city on the East Coast. Nick tells the reader that he, Daisy, Tom, Jordan, and Gatsby are all from the Midwest, and have a different outlook on the fast paced, immoral city lifestyle, but he is frustrated because they all try so desperately to fit in and he feels that this is hypocritical. He says of the five of them, “we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life” (184), recognizing that they are all flawed to Eastern life in some way, but at the same time, saying this to make himself feel like he is not the only outcast. Nick is the only individual in his groups of peers to be unable to adapt completely to the luxurious lifestyle they have not only because he has the least lavish house, but also because he is one of the three people to attend Gatsby’s funeral. His innate quality of Midwest morality quality allows him to stand up for what he believes in, though it may not be socially acceptable. Nick wants “the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral

attention forever” (6), which is an unrealistic vision living in such city where people are more likely to do more reckless things that they can easily get away with. For example, Tom’s relationship with Myrtle. When Nick first learns of Tom’s “girl” on the side, he does not immediately make the connection that the two are romantically involved. When Jordan tells him what is actually going on, instead of acting nonchalant or staying out of Tom and Daisy’s personal business, his “instinct was to telephone immediately for the police” (20). This helps him to stand out from those he believes are a “rotten crowd” (154).

Fitzgerald points out that trying to be a good person in a rotten society is difficult and further emphasizes it by relating to the reader how miserable everyone is on the inside. Daisy, who needs to separate herself from the extravagant lifestyle she has known in order to not be so miserable, is the first character to tell this to the reader when she says, “I think everything’s terrible anyhow. . . Everybody thinks so-the most advanced people” (21-22). As jaded as Daisy sounds, she is right about how everybody thinks in the novel. Nick does not think that she has a right to feel this way since she is beautiful, rich, has a family, and gets what she wants. Daisy lived in an “artificial world redolent of orchids and pleasant, cheerful snobbery” (158), which was a blessed way of life in his perspective. Though she had more material wealth than Nick, Nick comes to a revelation that “there was no difference between men, in intelligence or race” (131) because everybody is susceptible to the same human reactions. This is still an overly optimistic ideal, however well it sounds in theory. The reality of the American Dream is that there is a huge difference between Harry and Tyrone having to search the streets in harsh winter for dope, and Gatsby having a giant pool (that he never uses); the gap of wealth is enormous, but Selby and Fitzgerald emphasize that the price of psychological suffering from a dream is one that everyone in America pays.

Tom's relationship with Daisy is much like this; neither of them are quite sure what they want from their relationship with each other. They do not seem to be happy together, but stay together while they both search for other qualities in other people that they find lacking in the other. In Daisy's case, Gatsby came back into her life quite unexpectedly and caused her to question who she should really be with because of her once ardent love affair with Gatsby. Tom has found someone, Myrtle, who is surer of herself than Daisy. Even though she can be obnoxious, she does not let her status as a workman's wife get in the way of her living vicariously fabulously through Tom. Tom and Daisy "can't stand the person they're married to" (37), according to a third party perspective, and while it is not necessarily true that Tom and Daisy cannot stand each other, this perspective displays how affairs, the search for love, lust, and something different from what they have, the appealing unattainable, do not adhere by class difference standards. Myrtle "contained no facet or gleam of beauty" (30), and it is her attitude that makes Tom attracted to her. She has vitality, according to Nick's observations, but acts man-ish for being loud and indelicate for screaming at Tom. Tom could have an affair with any woman he wants because he is so wealthy, which is exactly what Myrtle is attracted to. She exists only to fulfill Tom's carnal needs, and Tom is essentially her arm candy.

Corruption of society and the characters' goodness and trying to maintain appearances are some common themes between *Requiem for a Dream* and *The Great Gatsby*. Tom and Daisy do not feel guilty for cheating on each other because their massive wealth gives them power without much consequence, but Harry and Marion feel disgusted at what Marion has to do in order to get their heroin. Since Tom and Daisy are rich, they are perhaps more likely to be corrupted, which is what Marion is talking about to Harry when she talks about her snotty upper middle class family. James Gatz, Harry, Marion, and Tyrone all try to make their dreams come

true, but end up failing miserably. The American Dream is just that--a delusion, a dream, or a nightmare that causes those who believe in it to lose themselves as they are chasing it.

### **Introduction to Historical Background**

The novels, both set in New York City, show just how much high and middle class society changed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and reveal the historical background of each time period. A country which begs of itself to, “Give me your tired, your poor, / your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” and yet treats these masses with disdain and hostility, does not offer much refuge or proper living conditions for those other than the descendants of the white Europeans who first imperialized America. Hubert Selby Jr. and F. Scott Fitzgerald created microcosms of New York City which reflect the ways they viewed the city and cultural opinions about it. During the fifty-three years between the publications of *The Great Gatsby* and *Requiem for a Dream*, the treatment of minorities—namely the Jewish and African Americans—drastically changed, a change that reflects the illusory nature of the American Dream.

Looking at certain Jewish characters in these novels such as Meyer Wolfshiem and the Goldfarb family will serve as examples of how the Jewish community was characterized or stereotyped in both Fitzgerald’s and Selby’s New York City. For example, the notion how both of these ethnic groups were inferior due to cultural differences. The same method for looking at the Jewish characters will apply also for the African American community in New York during both of these writer’s lives. Despite cultural differences among characters in both novels, Selby and Fitzgerald, while criticizing New York’s ethnic division, also transcend discussing it and make a larger conclusion about the nature of humanity. While each of their characters has a

different version of greatness, these novels demonstrate that unrealistic expectations for the future is a particularly perverted delusion.

### **Historical Background for Black and Jewish Populations in 20<sup>th</sup> Century New York**

New York City is still considered the epicenter of American life. Asking any person living outside America where they would like to go in this country, the response would most likely be the Big Apple. The reason for this is that New York City was and remains mostly a city of and for immigrants. It is a place where those coming from the outside would make their living and feel right at home amongst other immigrants as well as natives and the assimilated. Yet, the majority of these minorities, according to Lederhendler who writes about the Jewish population specifically residing in New York City, were “concentrated in specific territory, both physical and socioeconomic” (8). Ghettos have come back into existence, with some living in slums with other immigrants from their countries or regions; neighborhoods were dedicated and named for the purpose of accommodating those who were different from the elite New York vacationers, businessmen, tradesmen, and Fifth Avenue consumers.

Meyer Wolfshiem is a good example of how someone of a minority faith is able to assimilate completely in Fitzgerald’s created society. The reader must keep in mind that Wolfshiem is a fictional character who was “an assimilated Jew created by an assimilated Catholic” (Berman 100). But, Fitzgerald did not miss his mark completely when characterizing Wolfshiem. The Jewish community in the late nineteenth century and even during the Great Depression were able to find more of a utopia in New York and more opportunities in a large urban setting than they were able to find in rural areas of Europe. Their economic situation was considerably better than any other immigrant minority, by working in garment manufacturing, or

even pursuing illegal means of gambling (Shefter 137). In 1912, there was a case involving the murder of a Jewish business owner, who ran illegal casinos. Herman Rosenthal was shot by three Jewish policemen, who Rosenthal had previously complained about to the press about for taking away his business, who were also gangsters. In this case, Rosenthal was gunned down by his own kind, those driven by greed and jealousy that comes with financial success (137). Meyer Wolfshiem is also a gambler, one of the most notorious and most feared of the lot. He is supposedly responsible for fixing the 1919 World's Series, which is a crime of considerable proportion. The reader cannot forget that while American laws may not necessarily reflect what is and is not morally sound, encompassing the American Dream would require one to follow the guidelines America enforces, as retribution for allowing one to live there. This would make Rosenthal as well as Wolfshiem's financial success unworthy to be a part of their other contributions for the acclimation of the American Dream.

If we fast forward fifty three years, we enter Selby's New York City and experience an entirely new outlook upon the Jewish community. New York no longer houses the most Jews out of any other city; rather, since 1960, the number of Jews had declined by fifty percent from what it was from the time of World War I (Lederhendler 11). Other changes came about as well; several Brooklyn neighborhoods which housed the majority of the Jewish population, once considered to be ultra-orthodox in nature (80), overflowed by the post-World War II refugee immigration. In the rest of the city, the Jewish were treated with hostility; young non-Jews began wearing swastikas on their clothing as a form of fashion, and many synagogues were destroyed by riots. Anti-Semitism during post-World War II was "conceptualized as a hostile response to the uneven distribution of socioeconomic gains in society and as the product of moral anonymity of modern society itself" (41). The problem was not only with religion, but

also with the major changes in society that were occurring. The changes in ideals in modern society affected not only the anti-Semites, but also the Jews. The Jews had their own responses to various forms of repression, such as applying the concept of free love to their lives.

Near the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, the Jewish immigrant population began reviving and following a tradition of free love within their communities. Stansell, who writes about the Jewish population in relation to the bohemian movement, explains this following tradition as a way to “create a link between proletarian assertion and sexual freedom” (Stansell 281). It was a way to combat socialist oppression in their native Eastern European countries, and those who emigrated had a grand vision of what their lives could and would be like in a seemingly unrepressed place. In Selby’s 1970s Brooklyn, he critiques this notion of the liberty of free love. While love itself is pure, too much idealization of it and loving other things too much can destroy its purity and power, therefore repressing the emotion. Harry and Marion give themselves freely to each other, and at first, Harry lets Marion also give herself to her therapist as well as Big Tim. Marion feels that there is nothing morally wrong with this due to her delusion in the face of addiction and continues to give herself to Big Tim for money and heroin, which destroys her relationship with Harry.

Contrary to the ideal of free love, traces of taboo relationships between immigrants and the native born are also seen in *Requiem for a Dream*. Relationships between them “in the nineteenth century would have been unthinkable” (Stansell 63). This is the kind of generation in which Sara Goldfarb would have grown up in, who wants nothing more from her son than for him to marry a nice Jewish girl and make her the grandmother of Jewish babies. She even tells Harry when he comes to visit her for the only time in the novel, “So now maybe you’ll meet a nice young Jewish girl and make me a grandmother . . . When’s the wedding?” (Selby 136). She

has her mind set upon this, and frequently looks at a picture of her whole family at Harry's bar mitzvah. There is no mention at even the possibility of an inter-cultural marriage; even Harry is solely interested in a Jewish girl. The Brooklyn neighborhoods of the 1970s still retain cultural ideals from the times of immigration to after the war. The Jews' notions of immigration of having economic success and free love were responses to the economic and sexual repression in their own countries, but pursuing success in America by illegal means as well as having de facto taboos against them on who they could love or marry debunked their dreams. Lederhendler writes, "Disillusionment with the big city is a cultural phenomenon that Jews have shared with the rest of their neighbors" (12). Describing disillusionment as a phenomenon implies the large density that it was experienced among the Jewish and their peers in an American society that seemingly was ideally supposed to accept any and all with open arms.

Like the Jewish population, the black population has also been the victim of estrangement from the rest of the city. At the turn of the century, "each immigrant group was deemed a particular race...at the bottom, the most primitive race, the African Americans" (Stansell 23). Stansell also claims that the Jews were not far from the bottom rung of the social ladder either, making Harry and Tyrone's friendship as well as Tom's intense racism seem very likely. There remains an argument in modern day whether this racism was a result of a fear of inner city neighborhoods and a desire to defend the white man's territory rather than pure ethnic backlash. The former seems the reason for the segregation in 1970s Brooklyn while the latter is the reason for Tom's racism based upon a society that was readjusting itself after World War I and slowly progressing into modernity. In both decades and in between, there remained a fear of the black men and even the shunning of the black intelligentsia (31).



This fear is also reversed in Fitzgerald's New York, in the scene in *Gatsby* in which the rich black family riding in a nice car glares at Nick and Gatsby. This fear and hostility serves as a sort of protection, a declaration that they are on the same rung of the social ladder and that they can fit in with high society. There was an idea of the "New Negro" in the 1920s in New York. This term was made popular by Alain Roy Locke in 1925 in a collection of essays he edited entitled *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. This was an influential work during the Harlem Renaissance as a large creative collaboration among black writers and artists. The New Negro Movement championed political equality and was outspoken against the laws of Jim Crow. The Harlem Renaissance and the flux of outspoken black artists was a major turning point which Fitzgerald would have seen happening, and may have influenced his work. As a result, Fitzgerald considers and analyzes race, class, and the idea of white supremacy.

In reality, however, the majority of blacks were denizens of working class neighborhoods, and this is shown through Tyrone, who lives in an all-black neighborhood of Brooklyn. A study of white ethnics has been conducted by Kornblum and Beshers, in which they took a survey of the number of ethnic groups in distinct neighborhoods. In the 1950s, a great interest arose in New York for a mass, national consumer culture, which broke up what mixing there was of different ethnic and cultural groups (202). Naturally, national broadcasts catered towards the white majority, which further alienated minorities. Kornblum and Beshers ask the question,

Does it come down to them sharing a white ethnic lifestyle, an expensive and often insecure amalgam of working class, ethnic, and middle class American cultural ways, lived out on the edge of the city, as far away from the status contaminating threat of minority people as possible? Have they merged their identities?  
(213)

They argue that the blending of native white middle class New Yorkers with other first or second generation European immigrants created a singular white ethnic identity that they all could identify with. Thus, the communities were “the American Dream realized of ethnic New Yorkers” (Stansell 213). This is a broad statement to make concerning the American Dream, and while various ethnic communities were able to assume a white consciousness and achieve financial and social success, the treatment of the black population remained, and arguably still remains, as a significant divide between the realization of the American Dream and the failure of it.

Selby continues in *Requiem for a Dream* what Fitzgerald started in *Gatsby*: displaying the plagues of a modernism resulting from the ruling hands of consumer giants and a general feeling of emptiness resulting from postwar sentiments. While *The Great Gatsby* was “one of the very first novels to depict the vacuousness of the new commercial culture” (Lehan 32), *Requiem for a Dream* explores the results of this emptiness, in displaying its manifestation into the form of addiction to heroin which is “but a metaphor or signification of an abstract ideal of happiness (Giles 98). While Harry, Marion, and Tyrone ceaselessly chase the drug they believe to be their escape from whatever problems, they chase nothing but a phantom. While the drug is a tangible object, their dream is not. If the situations in *Requiem* are the manifestations of the beginnings of the destruction of humanity and happiness from mass commercial culture, Jay Gatsby’s motives and actions are the precursors. Fitzgerald “revealed a man whose intensity of dream partook of a state of mind that embodied America itself” (Lehan 12). Jay Gatsby’s obsession with Daisy is so strong that it stands for if not an entire nation, a type of high class culture that is used to getting what it wants, and is always ever chasing more. This trickles down into middle class families as well, such as Harry and Marion’s, until they, as well as

Gatsby, deny their primary responsibilities as ethical human beings and are unable to assume any control over their lives.

These visions of millions of empty shells walking the earth are dispiriting, but the reader must keep in mind that the characters are only representations of the dark part of humanity which allows ourselves to be controlled and visibly affected by forms of media and commercialism—or delusions that foster belief in a better life. Influence is impossible to avoid of course, but people can choose the amount of control they want it to have over them. Sara Goldfarb, for example, allows the “omnipresent corporations to have godlike power in American society” (Giles 107). She devotes her day to television, her form of worship, and her sense of privacy is destroyed in her hallucinations. In Fitzgerald’s world, “technology and mass media were beginning to take over America to shape and determine the collective mind,” which, as mentioned earlier, was not only a cause of further racial and ethnic divide, but, an overall dehumanization (Lehan 9). Selby depicts a capitalistic society which introduces the possibility of addiction in order to make its citizens a slave to it; ironically, his characters attempt to use it as an escape from the capitalistic, oppressive society they see, but they fail miserably. This is precisely why the underground drug industry in 1970s Brooklyn and Gatsby’s illegal career as a bootlegger in 1920s Manhattan flourish.

### **Conclusion**

In a 1989 interview conducted by Allan Vorda entitled *Examining the Disease*, Hubert Selby says the following about the reasoning behind writing *Requiem for a Dream*:

We are all dealing with mental obsessions and in this case, the Great American Dream: if you make it on the outside, then everything is going to be fine. It's not true. I don't care how limited or infinite your dream may be. Success is an inside job because life is an inside job. . . We still have this obsession to look for anything that will quiet the raging in our heads. (207)

This could just as well explain why Jay Gatsby, though financially secure, does not excessively care about his wealth; he only uses it to achieve winning Daisy as his own. Life, as an “inside job,” does not serve any of our characters well, and only leads to their further imprisonment, or worse, their deaths. New York City represents the closing of the previously open, enigmatic Western frontier. It also represents the freedom that mankind has to invent himself anew, and giving himself the rights of every other man, whether he came from a rural background in America or abroad. This is a modernist ideal present in both novels. The Valley of Ashes in *The Great Gatsby* is where the dreams of success, wealth, love, and romantic expectations of Harry, Marion, Tyrone, and Gatsby are laid to rest. As Lehan writes, “the death of a dream foreshadows the death of the dreamer” (97). The one thing their dead dreams lack is a requiem.

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